

Housing goals to spike Canada's emissions

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Body

Millions of new homes are needed over the next few years, but they will have a huge impact on Canada's greenhouse gas emissions - and we need to start thinking about what we can do about this now, warns a new report from RBC's Climate Action Institute.

The report finds the 5.8 million homes the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. (CMHC) says are required nationally by 2030 to address the housing crisis will generate as much as 18 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions if built according to current practices.

Unfortunately, "with a few exceptions" most of the cranes in the sky and concrete being set in Toronto right now is for condos "built to a terrible standard," said Luigi Ferrara, chair and CEO of the Brookfield Sustainability Institute, which collaborated on the report.

Glass façades, for example, will need to be replaced in 10 to 15 years, and some of these new condos will be even less energy-efficient than the older apartment towers of the '50s, which historically have been the toughest type to retrofit.

"(These condos) are designed to become our building problem of the future," said Ferrara, who is also the dean of the Centre for Arts, Design and Information Technology at George Brown College.

"At the same time, new homes can be a tremendous opportunity," he said. "You can build to a higher standard than you can, necessarily, when you're retrofitting a building."

The report presents seven recommendations to help reduce emissions from both new and existing buildings, including tightening building codes across provinces, partnering with other cold countries to improve and lower costs of heat pumps, and creating "demonstration districts" that show more carbon-friendly neighbourhood are possible.

There are a handful of such demonstration districts around the world, such as BedZED in London, a sustainable community with 100 homes as well as office, community and educational space, Ferrara said, built with carbon neutral materials, smaller shared spaces, proximity to transit, and community energy and waste systems.

"That's the kind of neighbourhood that we need to be building and every single subdivision should be moving in that direction," he said.

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One such project closer to home is George Brown College's Limberlost Place, a 10-storey building made out of mass timber currently under construction at Queens Quay East and Dockside Drive that promises to be net zero.

Carol Phillips, design leader and partner at Moriyama Teshima Architects, which designed the building along with Acton Ostry Architects, said she hopes other developers can learn from the project.

Carbon emissions can come in the form of operational emissions from heating and cooling, but also be produced in the making of the materials used in construction such as steel and concrete, said Colin Guldemann, senior economist at the RBC Climate Action Institute and lead author of the report.

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